CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Contra Costa supervisors writing pit bull spay, neuter ordinance

By Rick Radin Contra Costa Times

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Two Contra Costa County supervisors are working on an ordinance that would require owners of pit bulls to spay or neuter their pets.

The move comes in the wake of the July death of 2-year-old Jacob Bisbee, who was killed by three of his stepfather's pit bulls in the garage of his Concord home.

John Gioia of Richmond and Mary Piepho of Discovery Bay want to model the ordinance after a 2006 San Francisco law that followed the mauling death of a 12-year-old.

The law will be aimed at controlling pit bull overpopulation, which will reduce the number of unwanted, unclaimed or neglected animals, Gioia said. Pit bulls that are spayed and neutered also tend to be less aggressive, he said.

"If you walk into a local shelter, the most prevalent breed is a pit bull or pit bull mix," Gioia said. "(Controlling overbreeding) is a humane thing to do since unclaimed animals are eventually euthanized."

Supervisor Susan Bonilla of Concord said she favored the idea of an ordinance while Federal Glover of Pittsburg said he wants to evaluate a written proposal before deciding.

Supervisor Gayle Uilkema of Lafayette said she wants to find out if pure pit bulls are as potentially dangerous as pit bull mixes before considering a law that covers the entire breed.

The board beefed up a dog ordinance after another mauling death in 2005, requiring convicted felons to have permits for dogs larger than 20 pounds, Gioia said.

They did not consider an ordinance to spay or neuter pit bulls at the time because state law prohibited treating some breeds differently from others, he said.

San Francisco enacted its ordinance after the state law was changed at the end of 2005, said Kat Brown, deputy director of animal care and control for the city.

Since then, Sonoma County, Gilroy, Lancaster, Manteca, San Bernardino and Ripon in California have enacted pit bull spay/neuter ordinances.

San Francisco is pleased with its ordinance, Brown said.

From February 2006 through August 2007, San Francisco's shelter took in 25 percent fewer pit bulls and had a 33 percent drop in pit bull euthanizations, she said.

"People are not acquiring (pit bulls) or breeding them as much, so they are not going to our shelters as much and not losing their lives here," Brown said.

Pit bulls and pit bull mixes were responsible for about 25 percent of the dog bite cases filed in San Francisco between Jan. 1, 2006, and July 1, according to a city survey.

A spokeswoman for the pit bull advocacy group Bad Rap criticized the San Francisco law, saying it is forcing many owners to hide their pit bulls, resulting in more isolation and poorly socialized pets.

"If Contra Costa goes ahead with mandatory spay-neuter, it will create an atmosphere where people are hiding their dogs," said Donna Reynolds of Bad Rap. "It's not a proactive response to irresponsible owners or too many dogs."

Reynolds said Bad Rap is offering vouchers for free spaying, neutering and vaccinations along with advice about proper training at community events.

Bad Rap is holding an event in Oakland from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturday at Verdes Carter Park, 98th Avenue and Bancroft Avenue.

"We want all our dogs to be trained or socialized," Reynolds said. "We want owners to be out in public and supported, not hiding their animals in a garage."

It's difficult for pit bull owners to be seen with their dogs these days, she said.

"The world treats you differently," Reynolds said. "Some people direct hate at you and you have to have a thick skin."

A Sonoma County official said the county enacted its law because about 50 percent of the dogs in its shelter at a given time are pit bulls.

"A lot of pit bulls we get have aggression toward people and other animals," said Bob Garcia, the county's director of animal services. "It's difficult to place an animal that has these behavior issues."

Animal control officers give owners of pit bulls that are not spayed or neutered a fix-it ticket. If they don't respond to the ticket, they're charged a \$210 fine, Garcia said.

There is an exception for purebred dogs registered with the American Kennel Club, he said.

"The law is relatively new, but we're starting to see a little decline in our shelter populations," Garcia said. "We rarely get registered dogs, and we think (the law) is going to reduce the number of backyard-bred animals."